

Be mindful, not ‘full of mind’



Highland Views

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Columnist

We have a neighbor who spends hours each day sitting on her lawn. She isn't lounging in a comfortable chair sipping a drink. She's pulling out unwelcome weeds.

Her hands are in the grass, down in the dirt. She doesn't wear gloves or use fancy tools. Just the implements provided by nature: her fingers.

Sometimes we talk with our neighbor while she's working, but mostly she sits quietly, completely focused. I have no idea what she thinks about while she's spying and prying the weeds. Maybe she's not thinking of anything, except what's before her, under her, on the green carpet.

Honoring my neighbor's centered contemplation, grounded on the earth, I think back to significant times when I would meditate.

My friend Lee is a Zen Buddhist priest. I once invited him into the county jail to lead inmates in meditation. Lee's presence was always a gift. His calm smile and gentle way of explaining his "practice" was appreciated by prisoners and by me. Chaplains need a good dose of calm and quiet too.

Lee invited me to spend a few nights in retreat at Green Gulch, the Zen farm nestled in a verdant valley near San Francisco. The peacefulness was palpable. Though there was always farmwork, maintenance and cooking to keep residents busy, there was no sense of stressful busyness.

My simple room was sparse but comfortable. Sleep was pure restfulness, with the calls of owls and frogs the only sounds in the night.

Early in the morning I entered the silence of the zendo, the dark meditation hall where everyone sat on their own mat and round pillow. Silence. Chanting. More silence. More chanting. The incense-scented atmosphere was enveloping and absorbing.

Afterward, breakfast with the sangha (community), sharing farm-fresh foods with warm bread right from the oven, was a meditation in itself.

My favorite form of meditation was "walking meditation," silent stepping while breathing and "being mindful." Probably the most important lesson I learned from Lee and his community.

To be mindful is NOT to be full of your mind. This takes years to master, and since no one masters it, they call it a "practice." You don't need to be a Buddhist or have any faith to learn this.

I sometimes say that Buddhism taught me how to breathe. In some ways that's true. My Christian faith taught me that "the Breath of Life" was the spirit of God — breathing was meant to be prayer, to constantly remind me to be grateful to God, to ask help from God, to think of God.

The lovely hymn we sang was "Breathe on Me, Breath of God."

To my mind, this is not mindfulness. To be mindful is to let the thinking (and theology) go. Not to be "mindless" or irrationally unaware. In fact, the oppo-



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site. A practice of mindfulness is to be fully aware or "awake" (the name "Buddha" means the "awake one").

"Now I see! ... now I get it!" That's close to the meaning of being mindful. The "now" is essential. This is precisely why an awareness of each breath is so vital — literally vital, life-giving. The most natural thing.

While staying at Green Gulch I savored being in the zendo, the gardens, the farm and walking to the ocean at Muir Beach. It was all a sanctuary full of delightful moments.

I also spent a little time in the small library. I read through D.T. Suzuki's "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind," works by Thich Nhat Hanh and other teachers. Then I found a collection of ancient stories and parables of The Buddha. I showed it to Lee and he told me the book wasn't read by many because it could be difficult. He smiled. "Take it with you; enjoy it."

Lee and I were privileged to sit in many interfaith gatherings together, breathing mindfully in silent listening. It is deeply meaningful to be in a room full of people representing many faiths and non-religious folks, being aware, awake.

Through faith and beyond, I've always returned to the natural simplicity of the breath and the practice of mindfulness. I'm not very good at it, I admit. Yet, as Lee might reassure me, it's not something to "get good at." You simply start over — like each breath. Be reminded of being alive.

When I let go of my attachment to beliefs and "spiritual instruction" books, I came to see that we're all in this together. No one's an expert. We all breathe-and forget to breathe.

A Zen, Hindu or Christian priest. A nun. A rabbi, imam, minister. A poet, scientist, naturalist. A bird, bumblebee, beetle or bear. A neighbor pulling weeds. Each a teacher. Each a bell calling us back to breathe life.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.